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ABSTRACT

A writing center course designed for adult learners offers features that will work in either a credit or a noncredit course. The classroom provides an informal setting and contains a variety of workbooks and audio visual materials, indexed for easy student reference. Sample paragraphs and essays illustrating different composition formats are kept on file, including famous speeches. A presentation easel containing sheets with explanatory material on grammar and structure eliminates the need to repeat instruction when individual problems arise. After giving each student a grammar test and an essay assignment, the teacher evaluates the essay and plans an individualized program of instruction with each student, which includes a contract specifying the amount of work to be done and the time allotted for it. The writing instruction progresses from grammar to paragraph development to essays, allowing students a choice of topics. Problems with this system include the time consuming entrance and exit interviews, nontraditional students who often refuse to sign contracts, and audiovisual materials that may be insulting to adult students. The successful features of the approach include the availability of materials, the student files, and teaching assistants or tutors to keep the student/teacher ratio low. (HTH)

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THE ADULT LEARNER IN THE WRITING CENTER: TEACHING TECHNIQUES

by

Rose Ann Kalister

During the past eight years I have worked in three different schools that have writing and learning centers. I designed the writing center for one of those schools. I wish now to tell you about the practical things I learned and did during that period. I must first clarify, however, that I am going to describe a writing center that was designed specifically for a non-credit class. But I am sure that most, if not all, of the following suggestions would work in a credit program also.

The Developmental English class was a four-contact hour, non-credit class that met at night twice a week. The class was based on an open-entry, open-exit, self-paced format.

The classroom consisted of tables and comfortable chairs that were positioned in open and half-concealed positions around the room. One writing center even had a few upholstered chairs and a coffee table, a less institutional area where the student and instructor could adjourn for discussion. Book shelves held a large variety of workbooks, audio cassettes, and slide series (such as the Center for Humanities series). Video machines and tape recorders were housed in carrels along a side wall. A rolladex was used to index the workbooks and handbooks according to the pertinent subject matter. If a student or instructor wanted information on subject verb agreement, for example, s/he would know exactly what page to turn to in the available books. The file cabinets housed individual student files plus a great deal of mini-course materials to which the students could help themselves. The mini-course sheets in the file cabinets had answer keys filed in front of them, and there were also answer keys within the workbooks. The answer keys saved time, gave the student instant feedback, and spared him/her

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embarrassment if s/he did poorly. Accordion folders containing other free materials were stapled on the bulletin board. (Wall-file pockets also work well and can be permanently mounted.) The folders contained examples of paragraphs and essays illustrating comparison and contrast, definition, argumentation, illustration, literary analysis etc.... It is also important to have more than just the basic and rudimentary kind of materials. For example, I had copies of Kennedy's Inaugural Address, and I frequently had students read it and underline examples of repetition, parallel structure, and figurative language. Such an item can be used for the marginal student as well as the more advanced student. Another such example would be Eugene A. McCarthy's short essay entitled "One Man's America." In it he alludes to the famous essay by Orwell on "Politics and the English Language;" he uses for illustrations the euphemistic, vague language that was used to describe the escalation of the Vietnam War. Another such example is Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The mere availability of such materials helps the students see the relevance and importance of their language and brings them its impact in other avenues of their life. Other more current examples would be Buchwald's column parodying the Pope's definition of the word "concupiscence" and Rayko's newspaper column debunking Phyllis Schafley's contention that nice ladies are not the recipients of sexual harassment.

A portable flip board or presentation easel containing sheets with explanatory materials about sentence structure, paragraphing, and essay writing was also part of the resources. In working individually with the students, I often found myself repeating or writing the same materials on the blackboard. The presentation easel allowed me to turn to the appropriate materials as I needed them, and if necessary, the student could go back to it to see the materials again.

There were also several visual reminders around the room, for instance,

shorthand examples of sentence construction. Three ways to write and punctuate a compound sentence:

1) _____ ; _____

2) _____ , and _____

_____ , but _____

_____ , for _____

3) _____ ; conjunctive adverb,_____

Such visual reminders help plaster the concept in the student's mind.

There were also, of course, hardbound dictionaries, thesauri, the Wagnall's Book of Snyonyms, The Elements of Style etc....

When students first came to class, I gave them a file folder and explained that it would be kept in the file to hold their materials and record their instructions, work and progress. The room was always open so a student could return anytime, take out his/her folder and continue working. I also asked the students to fill out an information sheet about themselves--the high school from which they graduated, their major, their reason for taking the class, their English background, and their perception of their writing abilities. Another sheet was also part of the file, and on that sheet would be recorded the student's test scores, program, assignments and dates, and recommendations. Such information proved invaluable when students moved on to other classes and instructors made inquiries or subsequent referrals.

In addition, students were asked to take a grammar test and to write an essay. The test covered only those aspects of grammar that relate most directly to composition--subject/verb agreement, clauses, types of sentences, punctuation.... The students marked their own tests and that worked out effectively. The procedure gave them immediate feedback, lessened the stress of being evaluated, and encouraged them to take an active part in planning their programs. After I

evaluated the essay, the student and I discussed the test and essay and planned an appropriate program of study. I showed the students what kind of materials were available and let them choose whatever they preferred, and important factor for adults particularly. I must admit, however, that some were incapable of choosing and wanted me to make all of the decisions. In those instances I readily made the decisions and tried always to choose materials in which the student was likely to succeed. I also asked them to sign a contract specifying the amount of work to be done and the time frame in which it was to be done.

In this kind of individualized program, the instructor is a resource person and one who instructs as needed. I used to go around to each student to ask how s/he was doing. If two or more students needed help with the same material, I worked with them as a group. Those who wanted help seized the opportunity. Those who didn't want help were left alone. For the most part the students were able to handle the grammar on their own. Composition was another matter.

Even though I never stressed a straight grammatical approach to composition, I found that many of the adults, especially those forty and older, wanted exactly that. Many asked me to diagram sentences on the blackboard, yet when I pressed those students to apply what they had learned by writing, some would balk. The application of the grammar was, of course, the real test and some were not willing to go that far. In a credit program, of course, they have no choice.

Once I was sure that the students understood and could recognize the different forms of paragraph development, I had them write four paragraphs--one of comparison and contrast, illustration, definition.... They were given choice. They were also given models that they could imitate and those helped very much. After that I moved them into essay writing and showed them how the patterns of organization were the same and spent time on thesis statements, overall organization, and coherence. I frequently used the process essay as the first essay. The how-to-do-it essay and the how-it-is-done essay worked very well because

they provided ample topics for the student (through jobs and hobbies) and almost always insured success.

I found that the non-traditional students often did better with informational subject matter rather than personal experience themes. They often bogged down in personal experience themes or sometimes were not able to make the transition needed when they entered other classes and had to write about academic subjects.

What were the problems in this system? What worked? What didn't?

1. The entry/exit interviews are very important but very time consuming. I found myself listening to endless monologues about what "my former English teachers did or didn't make me do or what I didn't do that I should have done." I used to think that those monologues had a cathartic value for the student, but I no longer believe that. In addition, even for the most patient instructor, such dialogues can become debilitating.

2. Students like the hands-on approach. They like browsing through handbooks, readers, and research manuals. Seeing and using good hardback dictionaries, thesauri and other such aids sometimes convinces them that they should part with twelve dollars and buy one for their home use. They also like taking and marking their own grammar and vocabulary tests.

3. Keeping files on the students was necessary and worth the effort. During the exit interviews, the student and I could look over accumulated work, and I could give the student a critique of his/her strengths and weakness. In such a way, the student can learn that writing is indeed a developmental process that does not end with that particular course.

5. A great deal of time can be spent in informal academic advising or personal, career counseling kinds of discussions. Consequently,

the instructor must be knowledgeable enough to understand when and where to refer the student to specialized help.

6. In marking papers one must always remain objective and diplomatic. The witty, but caustic remark will usually be considered an affront.

7. Such classes always demand a very low student-teacher ratio. I would recommend a seasoned teacher assisted by two TA's or good tutors.

8. Non-traditional students in a non-credit class will often refuse to sign contracts.

9. In a non-credit course, enrollment can drop tremendously.

10. Non-traditional students are frequently too ambitious and will attempt more than they can reasonably handle.

11. Audio-tutorial and slide series materials must be reviewed carefully before they are purchased. Adults will consider some of them insulting. I have not found them to be tremendously popular. The English mini-course series with tapes and manuals is popular and so too is the Center of Humanities series on "The Research Paper Made Easy." It comes in three segments.

I am sure that all of the practical suggestions I have talked about would work twice as effectively in a credit composition course for the most obvious reason--the students will receive tangible credit for their work; consequently, they are more likely to take advantage.